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Assembly Mounds in the Danelaw: Place-name and Archaeological Evidence in the Historic Landscape

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Abstract - The mound as a focus for early medieval assembly is found widely throughout Northern Europe in the first millennium AD. Some have argued such features are evidence of early practices situated around places of ancestral importance, others that an elite need for legitimate power drove such adoptions. Elsewhere evidence for purpose-built mounds suggests they were intrinsic to the staging of events at an assembly and could be manufactured if needed. This paper builds on the results presented in the Ph.D. thesis of the first author. Here we take up the issue of meeting mounds, focusing on their role as sites of assembly in the Danelaw. This region of northern and eastern England was first documented in the early 11th century as an area subject to conquest and colonization from Scandinavia in the 9th century and beyond. The county of Yorkshire forms a case study within which we explore the use of the mound for assembly purposes, the types of monuments selected, the origins of these monuments and the activity at them, and finally the possible Scandinavian influences on assembly practices in the region.

Introduction

The assembly (cf. a gathering, meeting, council, conclave, etc.) was a recurrent attribute of re-emergent political life in the fragmented polities of post-Roman Europe. Assembly is a broad label, and meetings took several different forms. On the one hand they could comprise “national” gatherings, exemplified by the Icelandic *alþing*, significant royal assemblies such as the *witan* of later Anglo-Saxon England (Roach 2013), and large-scale military musters exemplified by the annual convention of the Carolingian *Placitum Generalis* at the Marchfield (Fouracre 2004:7). There were also popular, local conventions recorded at an early date. These included the courts of the Frankish *mallus*, documented from the early 6th century (Barnwell 2004:234), the emergence of the hundred and wapentake in the 10th-century Anglo-Saxon law-codes, and the *haerred* and *hundari* of Scandinavia (Andersson 1999:5–12, 2000:233–238; Brink 2008:95, 109). All levels of meetings were usually associated with specific places and foci. These included trees, for example the synod convened at Augustine’s Oak in 603 (*Historia Ecclesiastica* II.2); stones, as at the *Lögberg*, or “law-rock” of Þingvellir (Hastrup 2008:64); and river crossings, exemplified in St. Cuthbert’s ordination at the lost *Adtuufyrði* in Northumberland (*Historia Ecclesiastica* IV.28). In England, the etymology of the many hundred and wapentake names recorded in Domesday Book reveals a similar variety of features, with meetings at trees, stones, fording places, and a wide range of other natural or human-made landmarks (Anderson 1934, 1939a, 1939b passim; Pantos 2001).

The most prominent class of monument chosen as a focus for meetings in early medieval Britain

is, however, the earthen or earth-and-stone-built mound. Aliko Pantos’ (2001:68) study of hundredal level assemblies in England revealed that 11% of the hundred and wapentake names recorded in the later 11th century referred to mounds or hills, by way of the Old English elements *hlāw* and *beorg*, alongside the Old Norse *haugr*. This is the highest proportion for a given monumental focus, eclipsed only by references to manors. Further afield, a mound comprises the central feature of the enduring assembly site of Tynwald, Isle of Man (Darvill 2004). They are also a well-noted feature in other areas, in Scandinavia and mainland Europe for example, including at the sites of Aspa Löt and Anundshögen in Sweden (Sanmark 2009:214–216, Sanmark and Semple 2008:248–252) and the *Mahlberg* in southern Germany (Iversen 2013:13). Although serving a different purpose, mounds are also associated with many of the royal inauguration sites of Ireland, for instance Carn Fraích on Ard Caoin in County Roscommon, Carn Inghine Bhriain at Coggins Hill in County Sligo, and Sgiath Gabhra in County Fermanagh (FitzPatrick 2004:49–53, 70; FitzPatrick et al. 2011:163–191), while royal inauguration mounds are also known from Scotland, not least that of Scone in Perthshire (Driscoll 2004).

As a consequence, scholarship generally assumes that the mound was an integral characteristic of outdoor assembly throughout Northwest Europe. This standpoint is not wholly accurate, however, and relies on a conflation of a variety of different types of sites operating at differing societal scales, over a large geographical area and chronological framework. For instance, the mounds that feature so prominently in the hundred and wapentake names of Domesday Book in England are barely, if at all,

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reflected in the place-names associated with the documented high-status royal-level assemblies of early medieval England. Further, recent archaeological work in England and Sweden has demonstrated that a number of well-attested assembly mounds enjoyed quite different biographies, with suggestions through excavation of de novo foundations and re-used older monumental complexes (Sanmark and Semple 2008 *passim*). Finally, it must be borne in mind that mounds featured and functioned in the early medieval landscape of England in many ways beyond merely the choreography of assembly. Prehistoric mounds were re-used in many cases for secondary burials, e.g., Burghfield Farm and Swallowcliffe Down (Semple 1998:118, Williams 2006:27–35) and in some cases as a means to dispose of executed criminals, as at Walkington Wold, East Yorkshire (Buckberry and Hadley 2007, Reynolds 2009). They were also a notable focus for cemeteries, as at Saltwood in Kent (Booth et al. 2011, Brookes and Reynolds 2011), and settlements, e.g., Hatton Rock, Warwickshire (see Crewe 2012 for an overview), as well as at the palace of Yeavering, Northumberland (Hope-Taylor 1977). Elsewhere, mounds may have functioned as hunting platforms (FitzPatrick 2013), and there are intimations from a variety of sources that a mound was a platform useful for promulgating law (Swift 1996). Last but not least, they were regularly used as markers in surviving charter bounds in Anglo-Saxon England (Reynolds 2002, 2009; Semple 1998). Given the usage of prehistoric and early medieval barrows, “barrow-like” knolls, and natural features for such a wide variety of early medieval practices, can we be certain the mound was merely a marker for meetings? Were burial mounds an archetype for assembly sites, borrowed and emulated across time as assembly practices diversified? Perhaps such features were relevant at only certain levels of conciliar activity, varying between local and elite administrative theater depending on their geographical context?

In this paper, we take up the issue of assembly mounds, focusing specifically on their role in the Danelaw. This region emerged in the 9th century AD, and circumscribed much of central and western Britain, supplanting the earlier Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Northumbria and East Anglia, alongside much of Mercia. This development was as a result of significant military incursions from Scandinavia, followed by settlement, as evidenced by the strong Old Norse influence on place-names in the region (Fellows-Jensen 1972). The Danelaw itself was not homogeneous, at different points divided into the territory of the Five Boroughs (a territory based around key fortified settlements in the East Midlands), alongside Kingdoms of East Anglia and York. The county of

Yorkshire, partially co-extensive with this latter polity, forms a case study within which we explore the use of assembly mounds, their origins, and the range of activity evident at the sites. A short summary of assembly-mound research sets the scene—this presentation is not intended to be comprehensive, and more detailed appraisals can be found in Skinner (2014). Assembly place-names are then considered, followed by an examination of Yorkshire meeting mounds in their landscape contexts. We argue that the available archaeological evidence, as well as an assessment of their situation within the settled landscape, points to the selection and use of mounds as enduring locales for long-term and repeated activity.

Previous Research

William of Malmesbury, writing in the early 12th century, in his discussion and description of the hundred, the wapentake and other similar meetings in England indicated no special role for earthen mounds or barrows (Thomson 1987:6). Procedure instead closely followed the tenets specified in the *Leges Edwardi Confessoris* (O’Brien 1999), the earliest document to describe the touching of weapons as a characteristic of the wapentake (*ibid.*:188–189). This detail was much quoted across later centuries (see for example Stubbs [1868:233–234] on Roger of Howden and William Camden [1701:61]). By the early modern era, historians also had access to Tacitus’ *Germania*, rediscovered in Hersfeld Abbey (Robinson 1991:1–8). As with the *Leges Edwardi Confessoris*, the *Germania* describes, in relation to northern communities beyond the Empire, outdoor meetings held on fixed days, where the agreement or otherwise with proposals was marked by the use of weapons (*Germania* XI). The recognized correspondence between these 2 documents may have prompted the shift in consensus opinion in England away from a putative Alfredian origin for the hundred and towards the idea of early shared political traditions with other Germanic-speaking groups (e.g., Stubbs 1874, 1906, 1908).

The emphasis in England at this time was on the open-air nature of the meetings rather than any specific type of location. In contrast, recognition of early “meeting-mounds” is evident in Scotland and Ireland in medieval and early modern writings. The mound at Scone was associated with the issuing of law in the 14th century (O’Grady 2008:11), whereas the identification of “mote hills” was set as an objective of the nascent *Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* in the 18th century (*ibid.*:10). In Ireland, many of the *oireachtas* (Gaelic “courts”; though see Simms 1987:64) were still reported to be in use during the 16th century (FitzPatrick 2004:17). Such

long associations between assemblies and mounds stand in sharp contrast to the later arrival of similar perceptions in England. Only in the second volume of Jacob Grimm's *Die Deutsche Rechtsaltertümer* (1828:421–424) is a specific category of assembly mounds noted, a viewpoint that influenced the work of John Kemble (1849:55–56) (Wiley 1971). This notion was elaborated on in Laurence Gomme's *Primitive Folk Moots* (1880), in which meeting mounds in England were considered as additional evidence for archaic, outdoor assemblies that had evolved within the broad tradition of late prehistoric, Germanic administrative practices (ibid.:105–106).

This new line of exploration evolved, it seems, from a growth in interest across the 19th century in philology and toponymy (cf. Grimm 1828). In place-name studies, Isaac Taylor (1888:197) was one of the first to identify a substantive link between assembly-attesting place-names with word elements denoting the presence of barrows and mounds. A.H. Allcroft (1908:542) later posited that hundred courts frequently re-used older barrows as expedient landscape markers. By the second decade of the 20th century, the newly formed English Place-Name Society (EPNS) stressed assembly mound names as a prominent category in accompaniment with trees, stones, and other features (Mawer 1922:24). This view continued in Olof Anderson's (1934, 1939a, 1939b) three-volume *English Hundred-names*, still the only comprehensive work on hundred names in England. Anderson (1934:xxxiii–xxxiv), like Mawer, considered that the mounds might have been used because of a mortuary association, but also stressed the importance of the visibility of such features.

Archaeological intervention has added to the debate. In England, Adkins and Petchey (1984) challenged the idea that meeting-mounds were ancient places of burial—prehistoric or early Anglo-Saxon. Following the excavation of the assembly mound of Secklow in Milton Keynes in 1977, they argued that the mound represented a specific class of purpose-built hundredal venue, probably dating from the 10th century and contemporaneous with the promulgation of the earliest known hundredal legislation (ibid.:246). Their hand-list of other plausible purpose-built assembly mounds has since been challenged (cf. Pantos 2001:15–16, Sanmark and Semple 2008:253), but there is no escaping the more general point, that mounds were used for local administrative arrangements, and these monument types are analogous to a monument form more closely associated with burial in prehistoric and early pre-Christian medieval societies.

Most recently, fieldwork in Sweden and England has identified further examples of purpose-built assembly mounds (e.g., Aspa Löt and Bällsta; see San-

mark and Semple 2008:250) and other monuments of a greater age, such as Anundshögen and Kjula Ås (ibid.:256). Sanmark (2009:205) has posited this as a reaction of local magnates “in response to the growing central power” monumentalizing the structures of local government from both older, existing locations and newly established venues. Alongside this, an increased elite interest in drawing ancient barrows and mounds into active service as places for meetings and ritualized performance is now recognized as a feature of changing practices involving the ancient landscape in Ireland (FitzPatrick 2004, FitzPatrick et al. 2011), Sweden (Brink 2001), England (Semple 2013) and Scotland (O'Grady 2014). Such features are argued to have possessed ancestral meaning, important within pre-Christian beliefs and malleable to political needs—associations that were later discouraged by the church (Semple 2013:234–235). The burial mound possessed supernatural associations in late Iron Age Scandinavia (Ellis-Davidson 1943), a perception communicated in the medieval literature of Wales and Ireland (Charles-Edwards 2004:98). Such associations may have prompted the adoption of such monuments in Ireland as royal seats of power (Lynn 2003:127; Warner 1988:57–58, 2004), and their appropriation and remodelling might have been used to legitimize contemporaneous power relations with reference to the past (FitzPatrick 2004:38, FitzPatrick et al. 2011, Gleeson 2015:47).

This paper takes inspiration from Elizabeth FitzPatrick's work on the broader cultural landscapes of the Irish inauguration mounds (Fitzpatrick 2004:35, 2013; FitzPatrick et al. 2011). Using Yorkshire as a study area, we first investigate assembly mounds attested in place-names, and then discuss barrows or mounds as places of assembly with reference to changing practices over time and administrative developments in the Danelaw and beyond.

Assembly Mounds and Place-Names

Broadly speaking, there are 2 categories of place-names that can make reference to an assembly mound. The first category comprises historically documented assemblies, either linked to a specific gathering/event or tied in terms of nomenclature to the names of territorial hundred and wapentake or shire units. Examples of these include the shire-moot held at Scutcher Knob, Oxfordshire in AD 990 x 992 (S1454; Swanton 2000:137), and the many hundred and wapentake unit names found in Domesday Book, e.g., the lapsed hundred of *Roeberg* in Berkshire (Anderson 1939b:206–207, Pantos 2001:202) and Threo wapentake in Lincolnshire (Anderson 1934:59, Pantos 2001:345).

The second category comprises what are known as assembly-attesting names, undocumented sites whose place-name elements refer specifically to the practice of assembly. These include the Old English elements *mōt*, or “meeting”, and *spell*, or “speech”, and the Old Norse *þing*, meaning “assembly”. While they can broadly be distinguished by linguistic grouping, Alikí Pantos (2004) has demonstrated how *mōt* and *þing* could each be used to refer to meetings and also their venues, both literal and figurative. Pantos indeed goes further to suggest that an Old English *þing* had gone out of use by the end of the 7th century to be replaced by *mōt* (ibid.:184). Conversely the Old English element *spell* appeared to have had a more restricted meaning, indicating discussion or the imparting of knowledge (ibid.:186). The occurrence of these name types has long been known (e.g., Mawer 1922:23), but until recently had not been examined as a distinct category. Pantos’s (2001) thesis was the first to investigate the occurrence of these names in systematic fashion for central England, an approach since applied in Scotland by Oliver O’Grady (2008), expanding upon the earlier work of Geoffrey Barrow (1981). Through the identification of the location and distribution of the aforementioned elements, joined by the Old English elements *mæðel* (“discussion”) and *sp(r)æc* (“speech”), Pantos (2001:168–169) was able to demonstrate the frequency of undocumented assembly attestations in place-name evidence and indications of regional variations in site types and practice. The distributions were notably marked by a high concentration of *þing* names in the north and east of England, while also identifying a significant cluster of *spell* names in the Midlands. This distribution was argued to reflect respectively “the early co-existence of several levels of assembly” (ibid.) and the impact of Scandinavian settlement in the latter part of the early medieval period. Of immediate relevance, however, was the relationship identified between assembly-attesting and mound-attesting name elements. While mounds were attested in 11% of the recorded hundred and wapentake names of Domesday Book, this proportion jumped radically to 43% of names when the search was confined to assembly-attesting toponyms (Pantos 2001:69). While the Old Norse *haugr* predominated in the Danelaw region, the Old English *hlāw* was more commonly found in the Midlands, while the Old English *beorg* characterized the majority of assembly mound citations in the south of England (ibid.).

The place-name data for the Danelaw is derived from the work of the English Place Name Society, whose county-by-county surveys have been ongoing since the early 20th century (Mawer and Stenton 1924). The Society and its volume authors have em-

ployed a developing methodology, which has seen a greater focus on field names in the last 4 decades. As the majority of assembly-attestations are derived from field-names, the earlier volumes in the series can be less helpful in this regard; in the Yorkshire surveys, Hugh Smith’s (1928, 1937) single volume assessments of the North and East Ridings inevitably provides an entirely different insight when compared to his eight-volume treatise on the West Riding, published in 1961. As a result, the character of assembly-attesting place-names cannot be directly compared between Ridings. A similar situation results from other early work in the southern borders of the Danelaw, notably in Bedfordshire (Mawer and Stenton 1926). This is partly ameliorated by Pantos’s use of unpublished material from the English Place Name Survey during her own work, but nonetheless constraints are present across the Danelaw in the available data. Hundred and wapentake nomenclature can be compared, by way of Anderson (1934, 1939a, 1939b), but assembly attestations are considered here only for the districts of the West Riding of Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Rutland, and Northamptonshire (Fig. 1).

The first observation to make is that the proportion of mound names that survive in the nomenclature for hundreds and wapentakes in the Danelaw is entirely consonant with the proportion identified nationwide by Alikí Pantos (Table 1). The hundred and wapentake territories, whose nomenclature identifies the presence of a focal mound or mounds, appear to be evenly distributed within these counties, and there are no obvious discrepancies in the size of their territories that might suggest a difference in

Table 1. The proportion of mound names identified in association with the 11th-century hundred and wapentake districts of the Danelaw. Data derived from Anderson (1934, 1939a, 1939b), Meany (1993), Pantos (2001), and Skinner (2014).

Name	Sub-district type	No. of mound names	Proportion of mound names (%)
Bedfordshire	Hundreds	2 of 9	22.2
Cambridgeshire	Hundreds	1 of 16	6.3
Derbyshire	Wapentakes	0 of 7	0.0
Essex	Hundreds	2 of 21	9.5
Huntingdonshire	Hundreds	0 of 4	0.0
Leicestershire	Wapentakes	0 of 4	0.0
Lincolnshire	Wapentakes	9 of 33	27.3
Norfolk	Hundreds	5 of 34	14.7
Northamptonshire	Hundreds	1 of 29	3.4
Nottinghamshire	Wapentakes	2 of 8	25.0
Rutland	Hundreds	0 of 3	0.0
Suffolk	Hundreds	2 of 24	8.3
Yorkshire East Riding	Hundreds	3 of 18	16.7
Yorkshire North Riding	Wapentakes	1 of 7	14.3
Yorkshire West Riding	Wapentakes	0 of 12	0.0
		Average	9.9

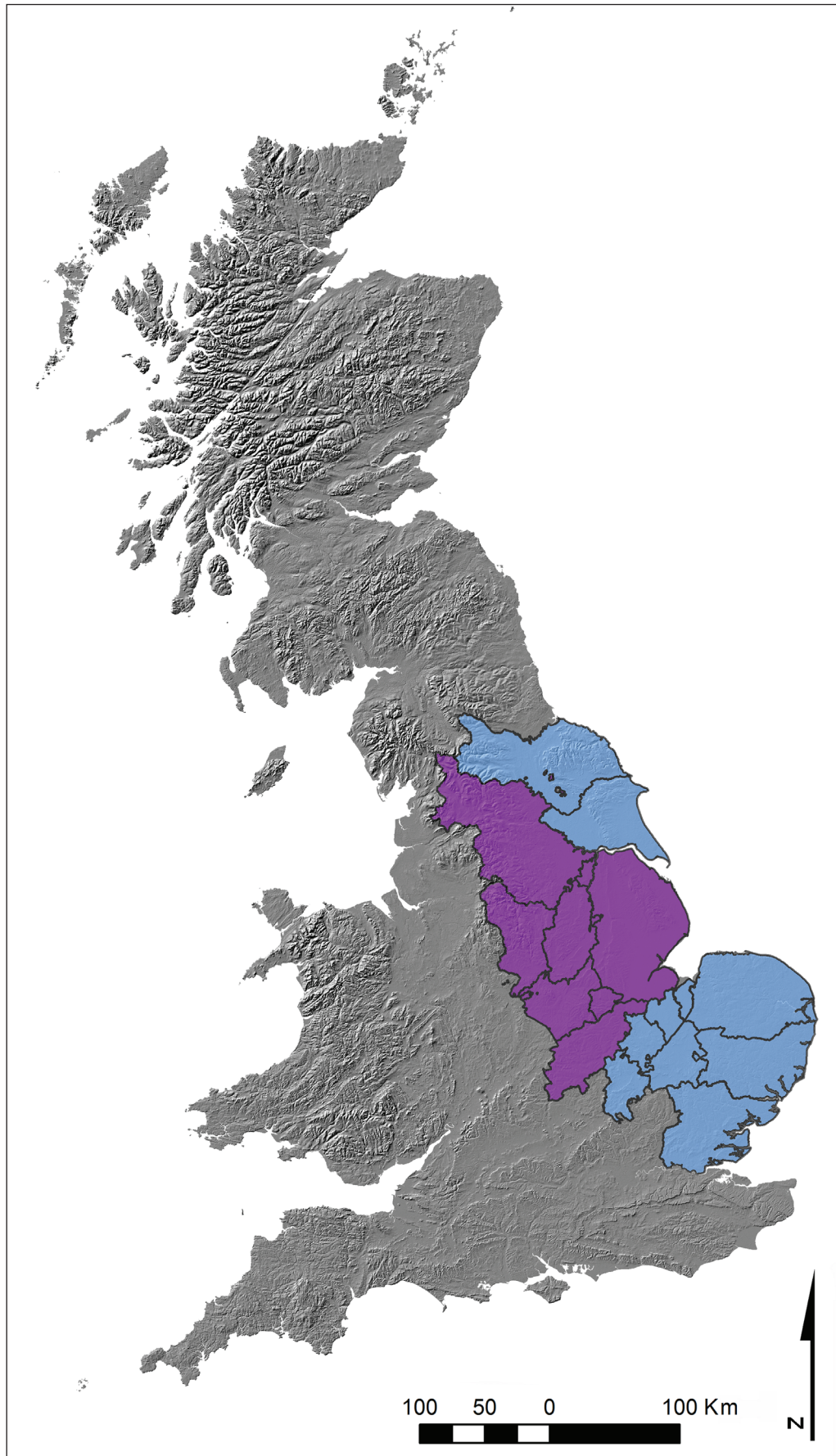


Figure 1. Historic English counties within the Danelaw region. Surveys in the counties marked in purple have included extensive examination of field names, those executed in the counties marked in blue have not.

character. The highest proportions of mound names are found in the wapentakes of Nottinghamshire (25%) and Lincolnshire (27.3%), central to the Five Boroughs of the Danelaw, although note must be made of Bedfordshire as a southerly outlier, with 22.2% of its hundred names attesting to the presence of mounds. There may be a lower proportion of mound names in the southern and eastern areas of Scandinavian settlement, where the hundred, rather than the wapentake, predominated, but overall it seems the mound was no more significant in one area than another as one of several types of assembly focus.

Assembly-attesting names from the Danelaw are far more revealing (Table 2). In the case of Derbyshire, 8 of the 11 identified assembly-attestations refer to meeting mounds. If the outliers of Rutland and Bedfordshire are excluded, 53.5% of the assembly-attesting place-names refer to mounds in the Danelaw, climbing to 60.6% if the pre-war EPNS surveys (Smith 1928, 1937), which did not attempt comprehensive survey of the field-names, are also omitted. These findings seem to demonstrate that there is a distinct qualitative difference between the assembly attestations in field and place-names and the nomenclature of the documented hundreds and wapentakes.

This analysis also suggests that attested meeting mounds do not fit neatly within the documented pattern of hundred and wapentake units; they seem in fact to have little spatial relationship with the units of the 10th- and 11th-century framework. They are not associated and do not correlate with the nomenclature of the units. It is possible that these place-name–attested meeting mounds represent earlier or alternative assembly places. The latter view has certainly been espoused with regard to Tingley in Morley wapentake (Anderson 1934:26, Smith 1961:2–175).

An argument against the idea that these attested meeting mounds are alternative venues for hundred

or wapentake gatherings is the fact that none of the documented post-Conquest wapentake assemblies of Yorkshire, where alternative locations were specified, refer to mounds as meeting places (Skinner 2014). Instead settlements, bridges and, in several instances, landmarks like the obelisk at Rudston in East Riding of Yorkshire, are named (Fig. 2; e.g., Brown 1902:67). Thus on initial inspection, the evidence appears entirely contradictory to Audrey Meaney’s (1993:69) suggestion for Cambridgeshire that the proliferation of mounds amid the assembly-attesting names of the region reflected the increasing popularity of this type of assembly venue in the centuries following the Norman Conquest. The evidence from Yorkshire implies that a network of meeting sites associated with mounds were superseded by later arrangements, or they existed in tandem, functioning as gathering places for purposes other than the hundred and wapentake administrative level. Pantos (2001:169) has posited that these sites may demonstrate the existence of locally prominent sub-hundredal assemblies, while John Baker and Stuart Brookes (2013:78) have suggested that they may also represent a palimpsest of previous conciliar arrangements, signalling that a substantial reorganization of local administration occurred towards the end of the early medieval period. It is worth underlining as well that the locations of assemblies of all kinds in the Yorkshire study region mentioned by Bede and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, also routinely fail to correlate with the known locations of the hundred and wapentake foci (Skinner 2014:250–251).

The place-name evidence for assembly mounds in the ridings of Yorkshire

In the East Riding of Yorkshire, place-names attesting to assembly mounds have been identified at Spell Howe [OE *spell* + ON *haugr*], 1.5 km southeast of Folkton (Smith 1937:116), and Spellow Clump [OE *spell* + ON *haugr*], 2.6 km to the north-west of Driffield (Fig. 3; Anderson 1934:15n, Smith 1937:153). These are joined by the lost locations of *Spellay* and *Spelhoudayl*, each associated with the extent of the manor of Burstwick on the Holderness peninsula (National Archives 2013:E142/49/4-7, DDCC/14/68) and, potentially, the *yins housum* noted in the bounds of Edgar’s 963 Newbald grant (S716; Hart 1975:121–123) (if, as Farrer [1914:15–18] has argued, this was a transcription error for *ping-hougum*).

In the North Riding, no assembly mound names have been conclusively linked with locatable mounds. Spella Farm is found 1.5 km northeast of the remains of Marton Priory, while *Mothow* is closely associated in a 14th-century charter with the settlement of Hovingham (Allison 2011:38–40,

Table 2. The proportion of mound names associated with places where the naming is indicative of assembly activity; taken from selected counties within the Danelaw. Data derived from Pantos (2001) and Skinner (2014).

Name	Sub-district type	No. of mound attestations	Proportion of mound attestations (%)
Derbyshire	Wapentakes	8 of 11	72.7
Leicestershire	Wapentakes	2 of 5	40.0
Lincolnshire	Wapentakes	14 of 23	60.9
Northamptonshire	Hundreds	3 of 8	37.5
Nottinghamshire	Wapentakes	4 of 6	66.7
Rutland	Hundreds	2 of 2	100.0
Yorkshire West Riding	Wapentakes	7 of 15	46.7
	Average		60.6



Figure 2. The Rudston monolith. Photograph © Tudor Skinner.

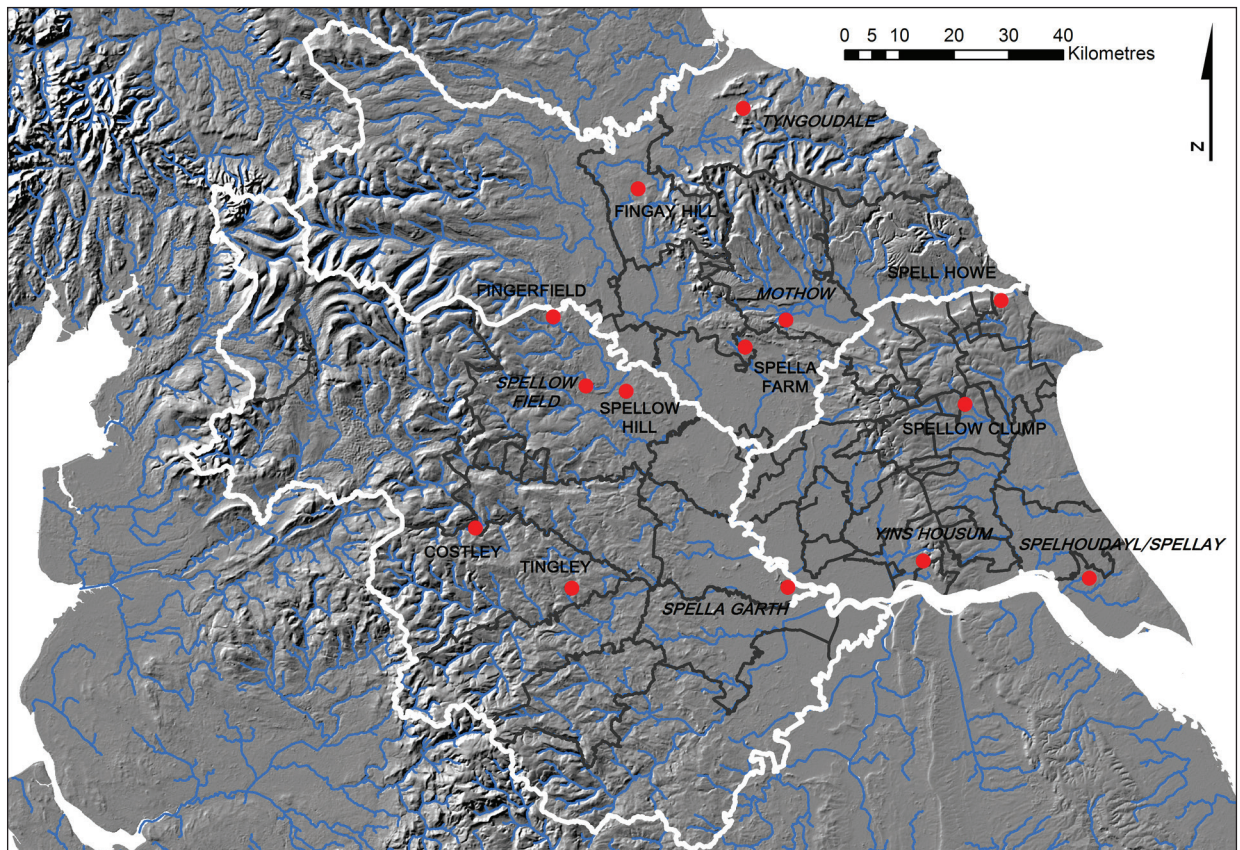


Figure 3. Assembly-attesting place-names from Yorkshire that appear to refer to mounds. Those highlighted in italics have not been securely located.

settlement in the medieval period, it could indicate that the *spell* names signify deliberate landscape planning, a model that would favor the late-period designation of assembly sites.

Once consideration is given to individual sites, far more can be gleaned. Most strikingly, none of these sites are situated within current or former known settlement contexts. This fact would accord with longstanding arguments that isolated locales were favored (e.g., Gelling 1978, Pantos 2003). However, this notion is in need of re-evaluation as it fails to adequately explain the situation of these Yorkshire sites. This objection is best exemplified by Spellow Clump, perched on the rising slopes of Elmswell Wold, overlooking both Driffield and Elmswell at a distance away of 2.6 and 1.5 km, respectively (Fig. 6). Ostensibly detached, it is nonetheless explicitly connected, by means of a Driffield Spellowgate and an Elmswell Spellowgate, 2 roads that connect these settlements to the attested assembly site. Further north, Spell Howe comprises another mound on the wold crest, overlooking the settlement of Folkton 1.5 km to the northwest. A well-attested and early description of a road connecting the assembly mound and a settlement, albeit not that of Folkton, exists in a 13th-century account from the chartulary of Bardney Abbey (Smith 1937:116):

one “Thorald de Hundemanby gave to the same church [Bardney] three roods in the town-fields, viz. between the road from Spelhou and Linghou-stich” (Farrer 1915:477). Hunmanby is itself situated 3.3 km to the southeast of Spell Howe, directly connected by a major road on the first edition Ordnance Survey. There is a further connection between Spell Howe and Hunmanby. Each are found in the Domesday hundred of Turbar, a lost mound name derived from the Old Norse *puri* and the Old English *beorg*, meaning “Thor’s mound” (Anderson 1934:12). The extent of this hundred closely corresponds to that of the soke of the manor of Hunmanby. On its own, this point would be of debatable significance, were it not for the fact that the soke of the contemporaneous manor of Driffield likewise closely observes the extent and bounds of the eponymous hundred. Both Spell Howe and Spellow Clump constitute ancillary mounds set on the high ground of the wolds overlooking significant late pre-Conquest estate centers. In each case, they were readily accessible to these centers, with this ease of access evident in the structure of land-communication routes that seem to have been longstanding.

There is supporting evidence to suggest that this pattern of meeting mounds ancillary to estates was more widespread. Remaining in the East Riding, the

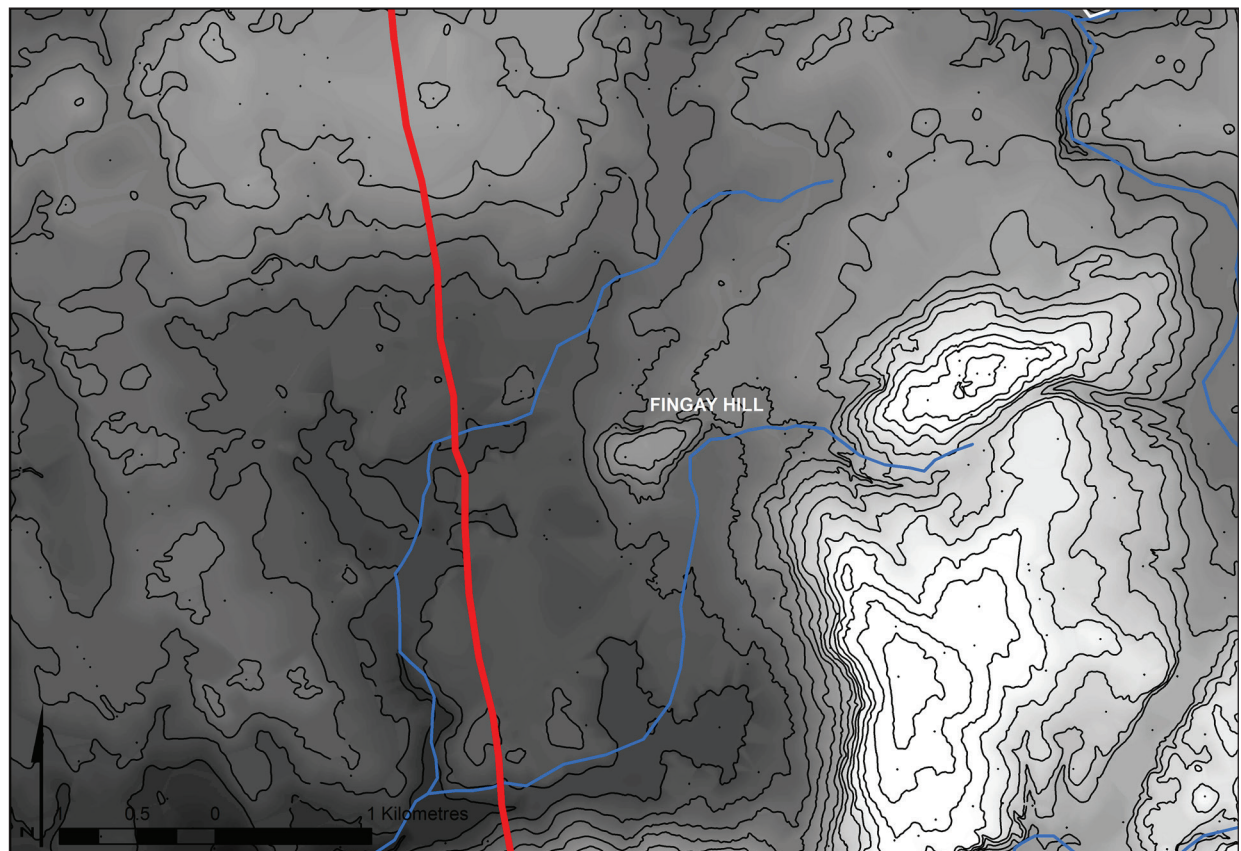


Figure 5. Immediate topography of Fingay Hill, North Yorkshire. The road to the west is the old Roman road running between Thirsk and Chester-le-Street.

Domesday hundred name of Huntow, derived from the Old Norse “Hundi’s/hunters’ mound” (Anderson 1934:12), is associated with one of several mound sites on the wold slopes that overlook the Domesday estate center of Bridlington to the south. The lost mound-attestations of *Spellay* and *Spelhoudayl*, by the association with the extent of Burstwick, indicate that they occupied a position at a short distance from the core of this manor. Moving away from the East Riding, the once upstanding mound at Tingley was situated at a crossroads 2 km to the southeast of Morley, within the selfsame wapentake of Morley. In the North Riding, *Mothow* almost certainly references a mound site immediately outside of Hovingham, one that has been tentatively identified as the purportedly remodelled Roman mound on the roadside 500 m to the east of the settlement (Allison 2011:38–40). Thingwall was evidently positioned at a short distance to the east or southeast of Whitby Abbey, possibly synonymous with the mound known as Haggitt Howe (Young 1817:912). However, there is no reason to think that this kind of positioning was specific to assembly mounds. It is readily identifiable at other assembly foci throughout Yorkshire, e.g., *Spelcros* in North Yorkshire, in relation to Wombledon and Barkston Ash in West Yorkshire, in relation to Sherburn-in-Elmet.

This type of relationship cannot be demonstrated conclusively for each mound. The riding court of Craike Hill, first recorded in the late 13th century (Brown 1902:43), is not so securely linked to Driffield as Spellow Clump, further to the west, though certainly Craike Hill performed a differing function. Neither is a relationship clear for Spellow Hill, near Staveley in the West Riding, though in this case there is no reason to suppose a functional difference from Spellow Clump and Spell Howe in the East Riding. Claro Hill constitutes the most notable exception. This was a later medieval recorded wapentake name, replacing that of Domesday Burghshire. It is not obviously ancillary to a major estate center, and it would be dubious to pose this in relation to the nearby settlement of Clareton, which, although it evidently enjoyed a toponymic link, is not evidently earlier than the wapentake site recorded in the post-Conquest period. Claro Hill does, however, occupy a conspicuously central location to a sub-division of the wapentake. This sub-division is identified in the Yorkshire Summary for the Domesday wapentake of Burghshire. It is divided three-fold (Maxwell 1962:2), the first section of which attends to properties in a discrete eastern portion of the wapentake, irrespective of fee or estate. This is the only part of Burghshire (and later Claro Hill) where a subdivision

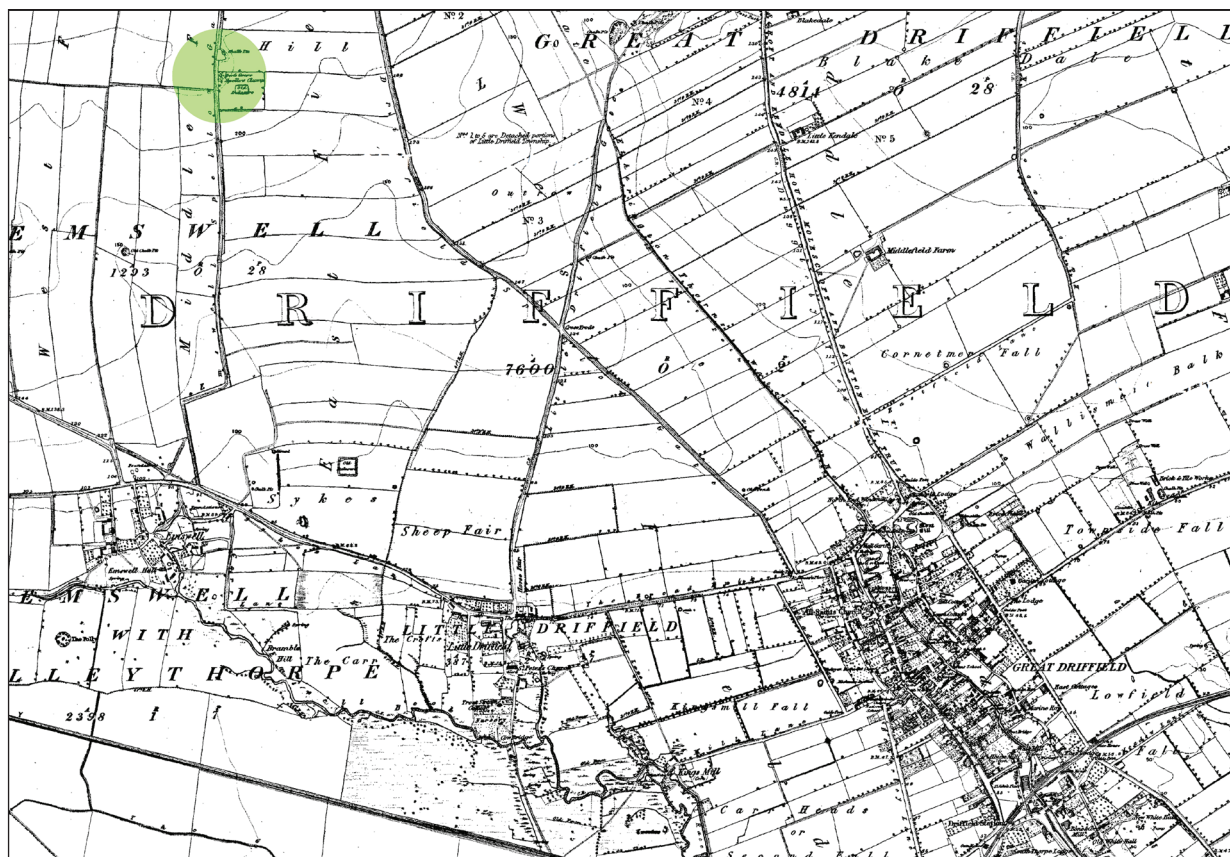


Figure 6. Spellow Clump (highlighted in green) in relation to Driffield, Elmswell and the Spellowgate road network. © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2014). All rights reserved. (1855).

in the text accords neatly with a physical, territorial sub-division. Within this, Claro Hill is directly central (Fig. 7). In tandem with its appearance as a later medieval replacement focus for the Domesday Burghshire, deviation from the ancillary pattern strongly implies a purposefully selected site based around territorial rather than tenurial norms. Claro Hill is now ploughed down—it was identified as a gravel moraine, rather than an artificial eminence, by Harry Speight (1894:203) in the later 19th century.

On initial inspection then, where meeting-mounds can be identified through place-name evidence, although these often come across as remote in landscape terms, they seem in fact to occupy an ancillary position to settlements and estate centers, some linked by recognizable designated land routes. This finding implies a level of function directly relevant to large estate units with pre-Conquest origins, which might further support the idea that these meeting-places evolved before the rolling out of a later planned administrative geography in the 10th and 11th centuries. Pertinent in this regard is the assertion by Rosamond Faith (2009:29) that assemblies situated on pasture, including such examples as Penenden Heath in Kent, and indeed Huntow with regard to Bridlington (Fenton-Thomas 2003:106), represented assemblies positioned on highly valued land within

easy reach of more densely settled zones. Such locations may well have emerged as places for seasonal gatherings in earlier centuries as settlements and estate centers developed. Discussion now turns to the archaeological evidence from several locations to identify if archaeological signatures for these sites can help elucidate their development as places of assembly over time.

The Archaeology of Assembly Mounds

Four mounds in Yorkshire are securely attested as upstanding or once-upstanding features marking the place of assembly. These are Spellow Clump, Spell Howe, Tingley, and Craike Hill. This last example is neither place-name attested nor listed in Domesday, but rather marks the location of the open-air court of the East Riding, first recorded in a late 13th-century inquisition (Brown 1902:43). The latter 2 examples have been subject to archaeological interventions. All are associated with additional archaeological features. A further 7 mound sites can be considered with varying degrees of confidence: Haggitt Howe, the purported site of Thingwall, near Whitby; Knowler Hill in Liversedge; *Mothow* in Hovingham; the several Huntows, near Bridlington; Claro Hill, the focus of Claro wapentake, the renamed territory

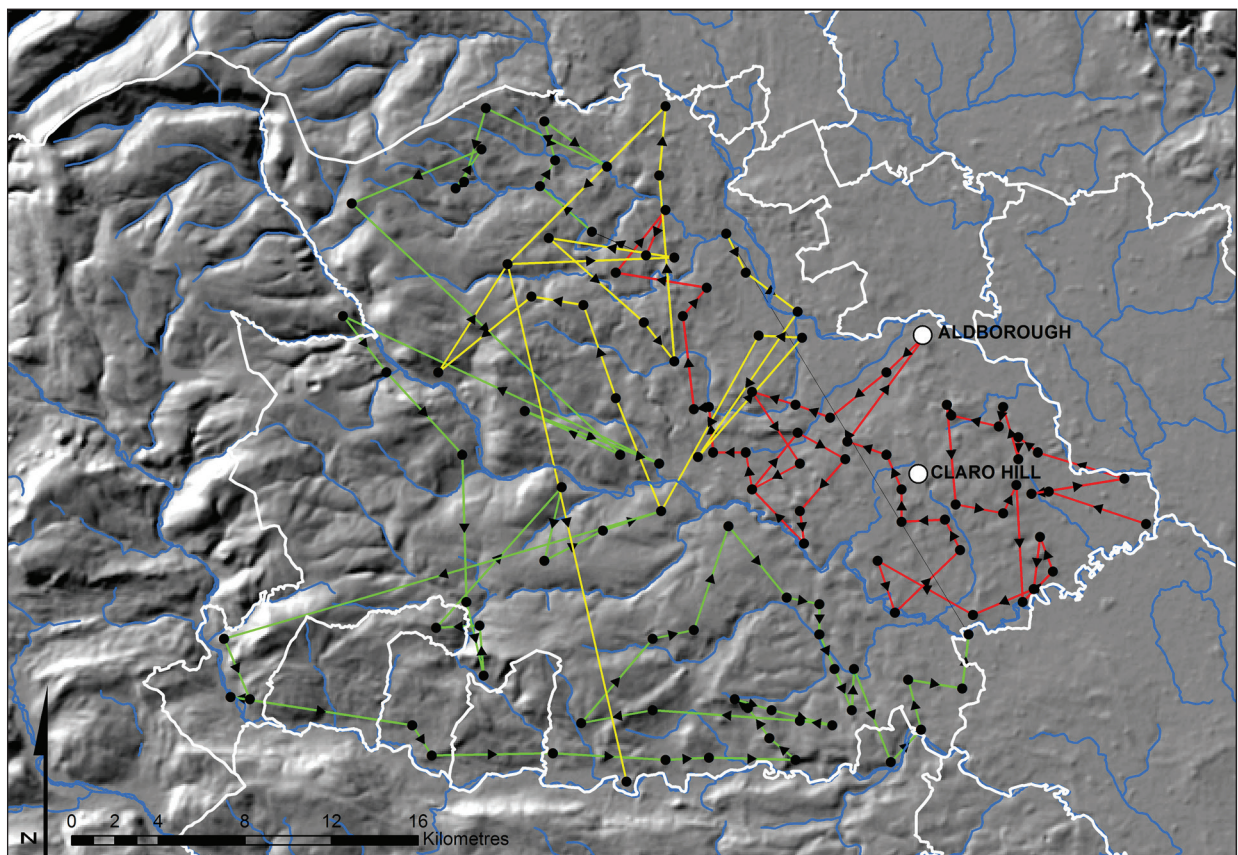


Figure 7. Location of Claro Hill in relation to the Domesday Summary of Burghshire. Lines color-coded red followed by green and yellow to indicate the 3 principal subdivisions in the order presented in the text (Maxwell 1962).

of Domesday Burghshire; John Mortimer's "Barrow 203" on the wolds overlooking the East Riding village, and hundredal focus, of Acklam; and finally Spellow Hill, near Staveley in the West Riding of Yorkshire. Consideration will commence with archaeological material directly associated with the mounds, before turning to their immediate and then wider surrounds.

The most recent, and secure work, has taken place at the site of the Tingley mound (Fig. 4), where a targeted metal-detector survey was undertaken in early 2010 on the location specified by Hugh Smith (1961:2–175) in advance of a renewed program of house-building.¹ This study revealed a striking assemblage of personal accoutrements. A cluster of pins within the assemblage reported to the PAS suggest an 8th- to 9th-century date alongside a fragment of a 5th- to 6th-century brooch from an adjacent curvilinear complex.² The high proportion of pins fits the arguments made by Julian Richards for an early medieval metalwork "fingerprint" north of the Humber, though the absence of coinage is striking (Richards et al. 2009). It is clear that there has been recurrent early Anglo-Saxon and mid-Anglo-Saxon activity at this mound, plausibly mid-Anglo-Saxon re-use of a barrow earlier used for a secondary burial. The lack of coinage in a period when coins were proliferating in the region (Pirie 1987), however, guards against straightforward assumptions of trading activity. This assemblage of pins could represent non-mortuary activity, and may result from assemblies and meetings and perhaps barter rather than designated trade or production. Indeed, the evidence for direct trading activity in association with the hundreds and wapentakes remains ambiguous and sparse (Britnell 1978, Pantos 2001:86–89, Skinner 2014:231–237; see also Mehler 2015 for comparative material from Iceland).

An early medieval mortuary episode is evident at Craike Hill. This mound in fact comprises a remodelled hillspur (now much reduced by gravel quarrying), protruding out of the southern side of a dry-valley in Tibthorpe Wold, 5.1 km to the west of Driffield, which in turn lies 3.5 km to the southwest of Spellow Clump (Mortimer and Sheppard 1905:235). During excavations in the late 19th century, John Mortimer found a flexed inhumation inserted into the southern side of the crest of the hill-spur (ibid.). The presence of worked iron with the burial has encouraged Sam Lucy (1998:130) and, later, Jo Buckberry (2004:433–434) to identify this as a secondary Anglo-Saxon inhumation. The significance of this inhumation is brought into stark relief when considered in light of the wider distribution of secondary early medieval inhumations in the area surrounding Driffield. The mound of Craike Hill is situated within a larger monumental complex of bar-

rows that extend through the dry-valley, predominantly of Bronze Age and Neolithic date (Stoertz 1997). Craike Hill marks the westernmost of several secondary early medieval burials situated between Tibthorpe wold and Elmswell to the east (Buckberry 2004:434, Mortimer and Sheppard 1905:243–246). However, it also marks the westernmost of the cluster of secondary burials associated with the area surrounding Driffield. It appears that Craike Hill occupied a border situation with regard to the settlement, a manor of ancient demesne in the 12th century that was evidently a royal residence by at least the early 8th century (ASC 704; Loveluck 1996). This corridor of mortuary activity is consonant with the edge of both Driffield soke and Driffield hundred in Domesday Book.

It is unfortunate that the mound at Spellow Clump was used as a post-medieval interment—it is also known as "Best's Grave" (Mortimer and Sheppard 1905:264)—and there is no early medieval material to be considered. However, an analogue to Tingley and Craike Hill may be found on the slopes directly above and to the east of the village, and hundredal focus, of Acklam. One member of the barrow cluster on Acklam wold, Mortimer number 203, was one of the only ones not to be excavated by this antiquarian, due to the damage it had received when used earlier in the 19th century as a cattle grave following a severe murrain (Mortimer and Sheppard 1905:85–86). Mortimer and Sheppard (1905:83–94) demonstrated that many of the barrows of Acklam wold were of Bronze Age date, and the omission of 203 would have here passed without note were it not for an earlier report by Thomas Whellan (1859:209n), who in 1856 recorded that a "Saxon sword was discovered in a barrow ... along with other sepulchral remains" on Acklam Wold. In the context of Mortimer's work, this report implies 203 provides the only evidence for early medieval activity on the ridgeline above the manor of Acklam. Considering the wider phenomenon of ridgeline assemblies associated with the hundreds in the East Riding (see Skinner 2014), this information poses a strong candidate for the hundredal site of Acklam and in turn reinforces an emerging pattern of early medieval mortuary activity associated with assembly mounds in Yorkshire.

While none of these constitute well-recorded excavations or tightly dated evidence, they at least offer discouragement for the notion of purpose-built mounds. The assembly mounds of Yorkshire, where the evidence allows, indicate the re-use of older foci of activity and consistent association with intimations of early medieval funerary activity. While one cannot be certain that this pattern reflects the re-use of earlier, prehistoric monuments, the position of Craike Hill within a wider Bronze and Iron Age

barrow cemetery (Stoertz 1997:32), a disposition shared with the putative site at Acklam, would favor this argument. Likewise, these are long-standing burial places set apart from active areas of settlement; we might envisage these as enduring landscape markers and even places that could have long held an assembly function.

When the evidence from the Portable Antiquities Scheme is considered in tandem, the long-standing use of these sites for assembly becomes more feasible. The evidence from Tingley indicates renewed, albeit ambiguous activity in the 8th and 9th centuries in relation to a mound (or at least location) associated with at least one early medieval mortuary episode of the 5th to 6th centuries. In a time when coinage was proliferating (Pirie 1987), none were found. Instead an assemblage of pins was recovered. It remains difficult to interpret how the assemblage of pins came together, but the numismatic lacuna does make a trade hypothesis difficult to substantiate. Comparanda for this multi-period early medieval metalwork assemblage are few in Yorkshire, but potentially very revealing. Two are known from PAS material, situated some 500 m north of Pocklington³ and Barmby Moor⁴, respectively, although these comprise collections of 8th- to 9th-century pins in accompaniment with contemporaneous stycas. The presence of coinage means that these sites are more likely to indicate trading activity, though coin loss is clearly a feature associated with a wider range of activities. Crucially, they represent group activities set apart from the known settlement pattern of the later 11th century. The coins range from the early 8th through to the mid-9th century, indicative of the re-use or continuity of the site for gatherings over a century or more. Recent scrutiny of the metalwork clusters associated with “productive” sites demonstrates the difficulties in ascribing function (Richards 1999, Ulmschneider 2002), challenges shared in any consideration of metalwork distributions in relation to assembly locations (Hall 2004, Mehler 2015, O’Grady 2014).

This is not an argument for hundredal assemblies of the 8th century, but it does indicate that parts of the later administrative infrastructure were foci of activity at an earlier date and that important places of gathering may have been co-opted into later systems, perhaps as ongoing locations for communal activity. The evidence does seem to suggest as well that new monumental mounds were not being raised and used for the purposes of assembly within these emerging administrative frameworks in this region. Instead, long-existing and revisited monuments and existing activity areas were being harnessed to the hundredal geography at the time of Domesday Book.

Another important observation is that none of these mounds were situated in featureless landscapes. The Tingley mound is associated with a crossroads of some antiquity; one branch at least of Roman origin (Thoresby 1715:195). Craike Hill, Spell Howe, and, if valid, Acklam barrow 203 are situated within discrete prehistoric barrow complexes (Mortimer and Sheppard 1905:83–94, Stoertz 1997), an attribution that can be extended to Huntow, regardless of which, if either, of the proposed barrow sites is valid (*ibid.*). In 4 cases, the mounds appear to be in close proximity to earthwork enclosures. This feature is visible as the sub-rectangular “Old Enclosure” depicted next to Spellow Clump on the first edition Ordnance Survey, and as the thin, rectangular “Lang Camp” found 200 m to the southwest of Spell Howe, again on the first edition (Figs. 8, 9). The cropmarks of a rectangular enclosure, measuring 68 m by 73 m, have been identified adjacent to the location of the Spellow Hill toponym in Staveley (NMR:MON#1542527). Finally, immediately south of Claro Hill was a sub-rectangular earthwork known as Gravel Hill Plump, roughly 45 m in breadth (NMR:MON#55105). With the exception of Spellow Hill, all of these have been interpreted as post-medieval structures. One can only state with certainty that they existed prior to the mid-19th century. If these are older, and relate specifically to assembly practice associated with these mounds, there are grounds to pose comparisons with the Elloe Stone in Lincolnshire, an assembly focus associated with an enclosure described as a *quadriuvium* in accounts of the 19th century (Everson and Stocker 1999:162–164). Such associations pose interesting questions and invite further research, but for now it is sufficient to acknowledge that, on the whole, mounds used for assemblies were accompanied by other monuments set within the historic landscape.

It is worth noting that there is no strong pattern of assemblies, either documented or place-name attested, directly linked to natural eminences in the Ridings of Yorkshire, despite plentiful evidence for a cross-over in function with artificial mounds in the wider Anglo-Saxon archaeological record (e.g., Williams 1997). Certainly assembly connections can be demonstrated further to the south (e.g., Meaney 1995, Pantos 2001). Claro Hill (West Riding) is dubious, having never been investigated, while Craike Hill (East Riding) is thought to be a remodelled hill-spur, already the focus of prehistoric burial. The most plausible candidate in the study area is that of Fingay Hill (North Riding), an assembly attestation linked to a single conspicuous rise in the Vale of York. Yet, in the chartulary of Guisborough Priory,



Figure 8. 1855 map (1:10560) of Spellow Clump and the “Old Enclosure”. © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2014). All rights reserved. (1855).

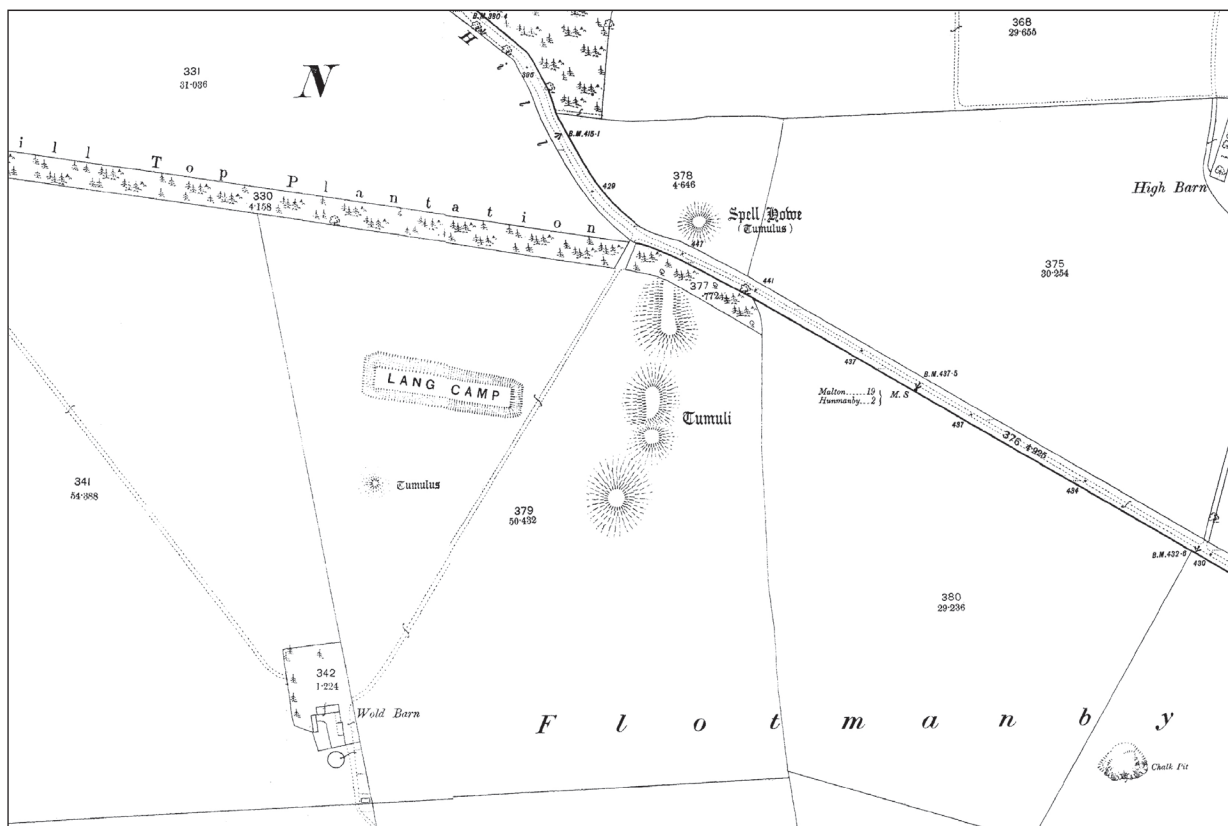


Figure 9. 1891 map (1:2500) of Spell Howe and “Lang Camp”. © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2014). All rights reserved. (1891).

it is referred to instead as “the heads of *Thyngowe*” (Brown 1894:290–291), suggestive of a differing topographic focus.

Discussion

In the opening to this paper, we asked whether the mounds were merely a marker for meetings or if additional activity promoted the choice of mounds as locales for assembly. In addition, we questioned whether they represented places relevant only to certain levels of conciliar activity. We also set out to establish whether these sites were chosen as assembly places as administrative systems evolved, or if these were late appropriations, harnessed to a planned system of administration set out in the centuries preceding the Norman Conquest.

In England, assembly mounds comprise a significant proportion (~11%) of the recorded hundred and wapentake names found in Domesday Book (Pantos 2001:68). Nonetheless, the overall picture remains one of variety, with manorial centers the most frequently cited type of assembly name, accompanied by fewer, if still numerous, references to trees, fords, and crosses. Aliko Pantos (2001:583) has shown that a slightly higher proportion of assembly mound citations are found in the Midlands, straddling the divide between the southern Danelaw and English Mercia (*ibid.*:70). However, mounds are not an ubiquitous feature of the hundred or wapentake in any part of England. It is clear from this, and the study of the Yorkshire administrative set up presented here, that a mound was a sometimes prominent but never essential feature of the hundred and wapentake assembly. In addition, the absence of a conspicuous spike in the number of hundred, wapentake, and assembly-attesting mound names in the Danelaw firmly implies that mound usage is not an imported Scandinavian conciliar feature. Instead, a locally varied distribution of assembly-mound sites has been identified which bear little correlation to the Domesday hundred and wapentake geography. These meeting-mounds show an ancillary association with settlements and estate centers and, where an archaeological profile can be elucidated, which is rare, activity of middle Anglo-Saxon date is evident. Although the evidence is difficult and sparse, the choice of these mounds for meetings may have its origin in the conciliar practices that developed prior to the establishment of the Danelaw.

These meeting places may in some cases have been appropriated from existing landscape markers or represent piecemeal additions to long-term patterns of conciliar activity, but mounds were, it seems, much more than just convenient landscape markers. When instances of undocumented assembly venues

are considered—that is assembly places attested only through place-name evidence—the proportion of mound names increases radically to ~43% of all known examples in England, by far the highest proportion when all types of landscape location and feature are considered. Such assembly-attesting place names have been considered variously to be relict from earlier conciliar arrangements (Baker and Brookes 2013:78) or else signifiers of other types of assembly (Pantos 2001:169). We might also postulate here that these categorizations may not be mutually exclusive. A range of long-standing group activities in a landscape—shared resources, crossing places, trading places, etc.—may lend themselves eventually to more formalized gatherings for the purpose of administration or governance (*cf.* Faith 2012, Meaney 1997).

An almost total absence of correlation between identified assembly mounds and documented assembly activity described by writers such as Bede or in the entries in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle, hints that these features were not operating within the confines of late elite administrative theater. Such sites seem, at least through their association with settlements and estate-centers, to be intimately wedded to the middle-Saxon occupation and use of the landscape and its resources. Indeed, assembly mounds, whether as part of a documented or assembly-attested body of place-names, are one of a series of varied foci, and notwithstanding this variety, the evidence from Yorkshire shows very clearly that a pattern of ancillary location, at a short distance (~1–3 km) from settlements and estate centers, was practiced, irrespective of the type of monument in question. Where excavation and other interventions have been recorded, the evidence points to these assembly mounds as long-term foci of activity, including plausibly some evidence of early to middle Anglo-Saxon mortuary activity at Craike Hill and Tingley and unusual metalwork deposits datable to the 8th to 9th centuries at the latter. These cases are isolated, but in all instances parallels can be drawn with distinctive metalwork assemblages associated with other hundred and wapentake sites in the East Riding, e.g., Rudston and Pocklington (Skinner 2014:235–236). It is very clear that the assembly associations represented only one episode of a broader pattern of early medieval activity at these sites.

It is not enough to treat the mound merely as an expedient landscape marker. Evidence for mortuary associations are strong, evident in the discovery of earlier secondary inhumations at some mounds, while others functioned as cemetery foci. Mortuary associations are also increasingly present towards the 7th and 8th centuries onwards in the form of execution sites (Reynolds 2009, Semple 2013). With

specific reference to assembly mounds, the circumstantial evidence for secondary inhumations at the Yorkshire mound sites, combined with the personal names attached to the non-sepulchral, purpose-built mounds of Secklow and Bledisloe Tump, further to the south, suggests that such mortuary associations may have been important to the choice of these places for assembly. It is this mortuary aspect that distinguishes the mound from other types of assembly focus. Both Sarah Semple (2013) and Elizabeth FitzPatrick (2004) have discussed how in various contexts the convergence of mortuary and supernatural associations linked to assembly mounds have served to legitimize later power-relations. Given the use of mounds alongside trees, crosses, and other features, mortuary activity was clearly not a sole driver for the selection of meeting-places, but there is a correspondence with the mounds selected as meeting locations.

A second observation to make from the archaeological evidence from Yorkshire is that varied activities took place at these sites over a long period of time. Alongside indications of early Anglo-Saxon burial, one finds hints at mid-Saxon activity as well. Rather than considering “ancestral legitimation” to be the sole reason why a mound was selected/constructed as an assembly site, it may be more prudent to consider the chosen sites as places that survived as physically prominent landmarks, visited and revisited for a variety of purposes over time. This interpretation could well explain why so many different assembly sites, regardless of whether mound or tree, are found in ancillary situations to settlements and estate centers. Such a position is likely to have been on the border of the cultivation zone surrounding these settlements, even prior to the advent of the deep plough. The assembly foci would have made for the nearest, most conspicuous and most accessible ancient landscape feature in many cases. As noted above, Faith (2009:29) has posited that assemblies situated on pasture-lands may have occupied areas of the landscape that operated as an interface between arable and transhumance activity that engendered seasonal gatherings—gatherings that over time could have developed into larger assemblies. Mounds may have had initial importance as folk burials or cemeteries that marked out ownership and territorial claims and functioned as nodal places of gathering and decision making relevant to the management of land and resources. Of course, the high proportion of assembly-attested mounds may be a reflection primarily of taphonomic factors—these are merely the monuments that best survived successful periods of landscape exploitation—but it is notable that this model cannot be applied to the assembly crosses, features almost entirely peculiar

to the Danelaw that follow the same pattern of ancillary location as the mounds. Perhaps these can be explained as a Christian response to the long-term established practices of assembly location and marking involving old and heathen mounds.

In summary, this study points the way towards avenues for future research. We need to examine how both documented and place-name-attested assembly sites related to the changing agricultural patterning of their surrounding landscapes. Although the evidence is both difficult and tenuous, there are intimations from Yorkshire of early systems of assembly which involved the widespread use of earth mounds or barrows as meeting-foci, probably also sites of early Anglo-Saxon burial, and which bore a strong spatial relationship to the developing settlement and estate patterns which came to define the middle Anglo-Saxon landscape. Activity at these places was perhaps sporadic but at some places took place repeatedly across the period. The later re-planning of the administrative geography, evident in the hundred and wapentake organization laid out at Domesday, appears to have largely cross-cut the earlier patterns of meeting foci; the shape of units could be retained while old meeting-sites were discarded, surviving only in place-name attestations and only very rarely referred to in the nomenclature for the new administrative geography. The meeting mound emerges then from this study as more than a useful landmark. It is more likely that these features were initially important to local communities through their role as burial markers and over time came to represent important markers of land ownership and connection to place. Mounds may have marked out places for gatherings for a variety of activities—not least seasonal events connected to the management of the land and its resources. Such continued renewal would have served to fix such places in terms of local memory and naming, despite a later reorganization of the administrative geography prior to the Conquest.

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Endnotes

- ¹PAS 2013: 7E9C73, 7E8131, 7D9174, 7D7B85, 7D6448, 7D4BF2, 7D3162, 7CF1A2, 7CD8D7, 7CAAEE7, 7C8427.
- ²PAS 2013: 7D4BF2, 7D3162, 7D9174, 7CF1A2.
- ³PAS 2013: YORYM1682, YORYM1683, YORYM1719, YORYM1718, YORYM1722, YORYM-F33FC7, YORYM-E4C041, YORYM-F33FC7, YORYM-E4C041.
- ⁴PAS 2013: YORYM-4E5EB1, SWYOR-ECB295.